

A First Encounter

In situ

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Preliminary data from the ‘Santa Cruz 35’ research project

Introduction

What was the first encounter between the indigenous population of Aruba and Europeans like? The report to the Archaeological Museum of Aruba on March 7, 2001, that human remains had been found during construction works in the district of Santa Cruz was not unusual considering the high archaeological value of this area. Nevertheless two rescue excavations and subsequent research are unveiling a part of the Aruban history which was unknown

before the archaeological findings at what is presently known as the ‘Santa Cruz 35 site’. The National Archaeological Museum of Aruba (NAMA) initiated a strategic partnership in 2014 with the international project ‘NEXUS 1492’ with the goal to continue researching, documenting and promoting this and other parts of the archaeological past of Aruba and to place this heritage within the context of the rich Amerindian heritage of the Caribbean.



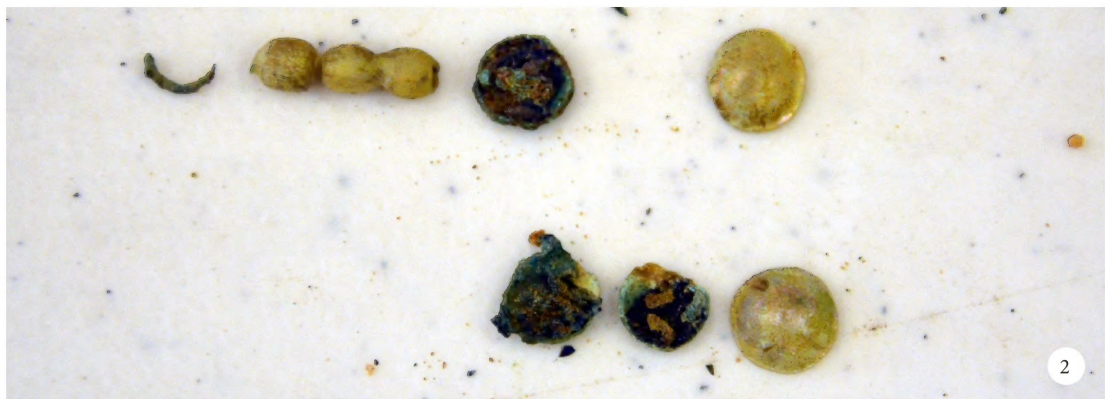
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The NEXUS project

NEXUS1492 is an international trans-disciplinary research project financed by the European Research Council which addresses the development and transformations of Caribbean indigenous cultures and societies across the historical divide of 1492. It addresses the immediate and lasting effects of the European colonisation processes and studies the Amerindian-European-African inter-cultural dynamics at multiple temporal and spatial scales. It aims to contribute to a historical awareness based on scientific data and to an enduring capacity for heritage protection with local Caribbean communities and with local, regional and global implications. Archaeology is the backbone of NEXUS1492 and includes research on the Greater Antilles, the Lesser Antilles, coastal South America and its offshore islands. In Aruba partners and projects include

collaboration with the NAMA to analyse the cultural remains of the Santa Cruz 35 site. These analyses comprise osteological, isotopic and a-DNA studies of the human skeletal remains, study of the mortuary practices, and geochemical, archaeometric and use wear analyses of ceramic, lithic shell, coral and bone artefacts, radiocarbon analysis, and starch grain analysis. The results will provide insights into the chronology of the Santa Cruz 35 burial assemblage, population origin, human mobility and dietary patterns, and into the manufacturing and use of tools and ornaments.





Field research at the Santa Cruz 35 site 2001 and 2012

The first so-called 'rescue excavation' took place from March to June 2001 at the Santa Cruz 35 site. Seven burials were documented but only the remains of 3, 2 children and 1 adult, were removed. Early assessment of the site had namely led the museum in this first stage to the decision that necessary steps were to be taken to protect the site for future research. Other findings included 2 golden rings, hundreds of beads from a necklace and bracelet, some ceramic material, 3 postholes which were presumably from a Prehistoric dwelling and a piece of historic construction material. This very diverse material from what seemed totally different periods fascinated both scholars and the public alike. First attempts to interpret the findings led to the assumption that this site dates back to the Spanish Period (1515-1636), but in any case it's from the Amerindian Historic Period (1515 -1880). Future research at the site came in the form of a second emergency excavation in 2012. The initial goal was to excavate the remaining burials identified in 2001, but the field campaign lasted from January to August due to the unexpected high content of archaeological

material on the site. A plot of 60 m² was exposed documenting 36 burials of which 18 were excavated yielding the remains of 19 individuals. Four of the burials included a wooden coffin and had clear signs of Christian burial traditions e.g. the position of the hands and orientation of the human skeletons. Among the artifacts two 'Spanish reales', a Christian medallion, a glass and metal earring but also numerous Amerindian materials like pottery, shell and stone were recovered. The first osteological analysis of the human skeletal remains in the field led towards the identification of men, women and children from Amerindian and probably 'mestizo' ancestry. A common first interpretation of the site was that it was a Catholic cemetery, probably from the Spanish period (1515-1636) and that a church must have stood in its vicinity. Considering the importance of the site for scientific research and historical identity of the Aruban community, the NAMA launched its efforts in 2012 to achieve permanent legal protection, conservation and further investigations of the site.



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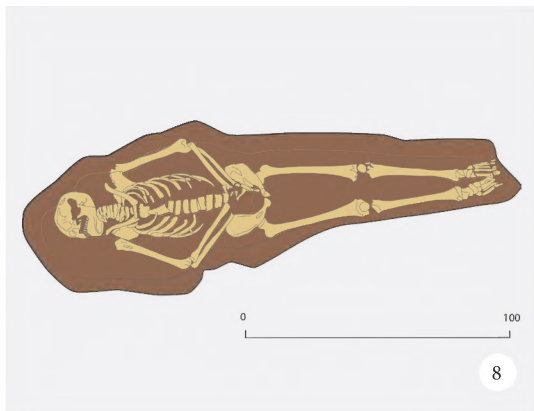
Analysis from the Nexus network

In 2015 the cemetery has been restudied by taking samples for isotopic analysis, and for a taphonomical research with a focus on burial practices. Skeletal remains have been analysed with a focus on demography and genetic affiliation. The burial practices show clear Christian elements like extended posture and east-west orientation, interments in a coffin, but also interments of persons simply dressed in a shroud or night dress. Two radiocarbon dates point to the use of the cemetery in the period 1730-1810. This is in accordance with the objects found in the graves.

There are osteological indications for a mixed Amerindian-European genetic affiliation of the burial population. The outcome of such a macroscopical investigation of skeletal traits can only be used as an indication. Therefore, more advanced analyses such as the study of ancient-DNA are necessary to reveal the identity with certainty.

Future encounters

The collaboration of the Figaroa-Tromp family as current owners of the Santa Cruz 35 site and the commitment of the Department of Urban Planning have been essential to allow the research of the Santa Cruz 35 site. This research collaboration by both Aruban professionals and international academics will continue in the coming years and will be the base for at least one PhD dissertation. The safeguard of the site as national monument is imperative to allow a thorough investigation and interpretation of the site. An exhibition of the results is planned in collaboration with 'Fundacion 1403'. This traveling exhibition will also incorporate the results of other focus areas of the NEXUS1492 project and will be travelling through the Caribbean islands. NAMA and NEXUS also plan to collaborate on the research of the Amerindian rock paintings and on the creation of an outreach project for schools and to direct efforts towards structurally incorporating the Amerindian heritage in the national education curriculum.



1. Archaeologist Harold Kelly during field work
2. Earrings of glass and metal
3. Giving information to strategic partners during their visit at the site
4. Assistant to the Archaeologist Fransisco Croes processing material in laboratory
5. Minister of Culture, Michelle Hooyboer- Winklaar visiting the site (2012)
6. Glass beads
7. Nails from a coffin
8. Illustration of a burial with the position of the hands showing Christian burial characteristics
9. Assistant to the Archaeologist Hiram Angela processing information after the excavation



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